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Washington Legislature Advances Tolling For Puget Sound

Matt Rosenberg

In its election year "short session" concluded last week, the Washington state legislature took several important, albeit partial steps to advance tolling, commuter rail, passenger-only ferries and innovative transportation funding partnerships with non-government entities.

Let's review some key '08 transportation bills that made it through both legislative chambers, and now await the signature of Gov. Christine Gregoire.

[ESHB 3096 \(bill as passed\)](#) - [bill report](#) - [legislative history](#)) has to do with the State Route 520 floating bridge connecting Seattle across Lake Washington to fast-growing Eastside business and residential centers such as Bellevue, Kirkland and Redmond. The bill reports reminds us that the bridge carries 115,000 vehicles and about 150,000 people per day; it is 1.5 miles long and 44 years old. It's been widely noted the rickety span could suffer a catastrophic failure in a severe windstorm or earthquake. So 3096 firms up the intent of lawmakers to toll State Route 520 to help pay for replacement of the current bridge. [It creates an SR 520 bridge tolling implementation committee to guide coming decisions by the state transportation department and state legislature.](#)

The committee's charge includes making recommendations to avoid traffic diversion to other state and regional roads such as the parallel I-90. Effectively, this will mean tolling on I-90 as well as 520. This will be a [crucial second step toward regional tolling for Puget Sound](#) - following on tolling which began last year on the new Tacoma Narrows Bridge, and the four-year SR 167 congestion pricing pilot project starting next month. While politically sensitive, [regional highway tolling](#), and in particular congestion pricing to control peak hour flows, are crucial if we are to handle a projected 52 percent increase in population by 2040.

The committee must also [consider technology](#). That means, in accordance with the current industry standard and tolling on SR 167 and the Tacoma Narrows Bridge, that [electronic transponders and overhead gantries will be prioritized over tollbooths](#). Additionally, the bill requires that the SR 520 tolling committee consider "partnership opportunities." This is a clear reference to possible alliances limiting taxpayer exposure if costs will ultimately exceed available public monies. [Partners would be non-government entities](#), perhaps labor or public employee union pension funds. [Private transportation investment funds also enter](#) into a variety of partnership agreements with willing government sponsors, but it's best if the public entity retains ownership of the asset and toll rates.

The 520 tolling committee must also consider input from the public and local elected officials, and report back to the governor and legislature by January of 2009. Then, the bill says, the state department of transportation may seek legislative approval for tolling the existing 520 bridge, and work with the feds to get around a generic prohibition of tolling on Interstates, barring a special agreement tailored to a facility. This is considered eminently do-able; and tolling on I-90 to limit traffic diversions is essential if tolling 520 is to work.

As noted in [this Washington Post story yesterday](#), Seattle is one of five regions nationwide to receive a special federal "Urban Partnerships" grant for innovative solutions to road congestion. Here, it is \$139 million, to help pay for implementation of congestion pricing on the new SR 520 bridge and various transit projects including \$3.5 million to help launch a new

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passenger-only ferry in the metro region's western reaches, between Kingston in Kitsap County, and downtown Seattle. But for Puget Sound to get this federal largesse, there's a hook: the grant requires that "variable" tolling, levied at different rates depending on time of day or road congestion level, be approved by the state by September 30, 2009 for the 520 corridor.

To set the stage for that '09 legislation, state lawmakers in the recent session also approved E2SHB 1773, which sets a broader state policy framework for tolling (bill as passed - final bill report - legislative history). The bill states that the legislature must authorize any specific tolls; that tolls can be applied to bridges, highways, transportation corridors, approaches and bi-state facilities; and that the aims of tolling in Washington state will be to improve transportation system efficiency and provide funding, not only for construction but also for maintenance, operations and management. This last part represents an important acknowledgement that tolling is not just for getting things built; it is also now necessary for a big share of life-cycle costs. That's because federal and state gas tax revenues are in an irreversible decline as sources for construction and maintenance.

Without specifically mentioning the word, the bill leaves open the possibility that with legislative approval some future tolling revenues could be used to help fund transit. This is something Cascadia Center supports, as our director Bruce Agnew tells the Seattle Post-Intelligencer this morning.

HB 2730 (bill as passed - bill report - legislative history) advances regional passenger-only ferries, rescinding a state prohibition against their operations by port districts on Puget Sound. This bill is tailored to the above-noted Kingston-Seattle foot ferry route for which the Port of Kingston has received federal grant funding contingent on tolling of SR 520.

The Eastside commuter rail line which Cascadia Center has championed as part of a rails and trails partnership will get a feasibility analysis, under HB 3324 (bill as approved - bill report - legislative history). It directs Sound Transit and the Puget Sound Regional Council to do a fresh analysis of proposed north-south commuter rail between residence-rich east Snohomish County and the booming Eastside business centers of King County, along the abandoned BNSF freight rail line.

Supplemental transportation appropriations via HB 2878 provide an additional peek into the legislature's thinking on metro-region roads and transit (bill as passed - bill report - legislative history).

Included in the bill are provisions which:

- secure \$300,000 for a consultant to devise a plan for co-development and public private partnerships at public ferry terminals (page 22, line 30);
- direct WSDOT to analyze, and if found feasible, seek requests for distribution of alternative fuels along WSDOT rights-of-way (page 22, line 34);
- underscore the importance to the \$4 billion bi-state I-5 Columbia River Crossing bridge replacement project of fully assessing "opportunities for the joining of state and local government agencies and the private sector in a strong partnership that contributes to the completion of the project" (page 51, between lines 14-23);
- direct that \$8.5 million of the state's passenger-only ferries account is provided for "near- and long-term costs of capital improvements in a business plan approved by the governor for passenger-only service."

The state is getting out of operating passenger-only ferries, and local operators including King County, the Port of Kingston, Kitsap Transit and others are filling the void. Cascadia Center continues to advocate a voluntary interlocal agreement between ports, cities, counties, private boat operators, tribes, labor and others - coupled with combined funding for foot ferries and Puget Sound cleanup - to help establish a coordinated regional foot ferry system on Puget Sound.

As a non-profit think tank, Cascadia Center does not lobby the legislature or advocate passage or rejection of any bill. However, we do try to advance solutions to a range of transportation problems via op-eds, papers, studies, conferences and this blog. So we're pleased that although possibilities for conclusive action were constrained in this year's session, significant progress continued on a number of issues important to us.

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WASHINGTON STATE, SR 520, I-90, PENSION FUNDS, PASSENGER-ONLY FERRIES, COMMUTER RAIL

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I seem to remember all of the Pro-9c Gas Tax advocates (saying) that we needed the gas tax to fund the 520 replacement and "save our children" from certain drowning and death when (not if) it collapses. Now they want to add a toll on top of this to save our children?

Posted by: Frustrated-with-Olympia Commuter | [March 18, 2008 12:38 PM](#)

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- Pacific Northwest Economic Region
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- Plug-in Partners
- Prosperity Partnership
- Public Private Partnerships Primer (FHWA)
- Puget Sound Regional Council
- Reason Foundation Mobility Project
- Regional Transportation Commission (Central Puget Sound)
- Regional Transportation District (Denver)
- Research & Innovative Technology Administration (U.S. DOT)
- Set America Free
- Silicon Valley Leadership Group
- Sound Transit
- TransLink (Vancouver region)
- Transportation Research Board
- TranStats; Bureau of Transportation Statistics (U.S. DOT)
- Tri-State Transportation Campaign (NY, NJ, CT)
- Urban Mobility Group
- U.S. DOT
- U. S. DOT Office of the Inspector General
- WA State Legislature
- WA State Legislature Bill Info
- WA State Transportation Center (UW)
- WA Transportation Commission
- Waterfront Coalition
- Washington State DOT (WSDOT)
- West Coast Collaborative
- WSDOT Alaskan Way Viaduct Replacement Project
- WSDOT S.R. 167 HOT Lanes Pilot Project
- WSDOT S.R. 520 Bridge Replacement & HOV Project

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